

Springfield Republican

Road projects stall for funds

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By **DAN RING**

BOSTON - The federal government is holding up some key road and bridge projects, including more than \$50 million of work in Western Massachusetts, saying the state has failed to approve enough money for its share.

Last month, the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration turned down the state's four-year transportation improvement program. The rejection means the state cannot solicit bids for the projects, with some exceptions, until a new transportation bond bill is passed by the Statehouse.

"We didn't approve it," Douglas Hecox, a Federal Highway Administration spokesman, said yesterday. "We'd like them to come back with a revised version that reflects the need for transportation financing to be available."

Hecox said the plan could be approved fairly quickly once the bond is passed. Federal funds provide 80 percent of financing for many of the projects, with the state picking up the rest.

State officials said the federal decision may have little practical effect. In any event, officials said, they didn't plan to seek bids on the projects until the bond bill was passed. Yesterday, Timothy W. Brennan, executive director of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, released a list of projects affected by the delay.

Brennan said the federal government is becoming more rigorous and aggressive in enforcing its rules.

The reconstruction of Route 5 in West Springfield, improvements along State Street in Springfield, an overhaul of the intersection of Route 9 and Route 47 in Hadley, and replacement of a bridge on Roosevelt Avenue in Springfield, are among the projects being held up.

Other Western Massachusetts projects on ice include an upgrade of Interstate 91 Exit 19 ramps in Northampton and installation of high-tech message and traffic control signs along I-91 in the Pioneer Valley and Franklin County.

Brennan said it's critical for state legislators to approve the bond bill, filed by Gov. Deval L. Patrick Nov. 29. Patrick submitted a three-year, \$2.9 billion transportation bond, the first since 2004. The bill is pending in the Legislature.

"The construction season isn't that far away," he said.

According to one letter from Federal Highway Administration officials to state Transportation Secretary Bernard E. Cohen, the state has failed to provide enough money for certain bridges that need to be replaced, including Interstate 91 southbound over Route 5 and the B&M Railroad in Northampton. Without passage of a bond bill,

another letter to Cohen said, federal money won't be released for projects in the state transportation plan.

Sen. Michael R. Knapik, R-Westfield, said the Patrick administration should have notified legislators of the delay.

"This is not the kind of information you tuck in your back pocket and hope no one notices," Knapik said.

Rep. Angelo J. Puppolo, Jr., D-Springfield, said he didn't know about the holdup. "We should have been made aware of this last month," he said.

Adam L. Hurtubise, a spokesman for the state Executive Office of Transportation and Public Works, downplayed the federal decision. He said denial of the transportation plan isn't causing delays because the state had already decided against advertising for any upcoming road or bridge projects until the bond bill is signed.

"Design and engineering of projects continue and current construction will continue into next year," he said.

The co-chairman of the Committee on Transportation, Rep. Joseph F. Wagner, D-Chicopee, said he expects approval of the bond would come well ahead of this year's construction season.

Wagner said he was not overly concerned about the federal government's denial of the transportation improvement plan.

"I think it's a shot across the bow," Wagner said.